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Snaring the ‘Big Tiger’ in Anti-Graft Campaign: Xi Asserts His Authority

By James Char

Synopsis

China’s anti-corruption campaign has intensified with the investigation of ex-Politburo Standing Committee member and former head of public security, Zhou Yongkang. With this latest move against one of his fiercest rivals, Xi Jinping has given the clearest indication yet of his dominance of the top echelon of Chinese politics and may well have set the stage for future institutional reforms.

Commentary

ON THE 29th of July 2014, the Central Discipline and Inspection Commission (CCDI) in Beijing finally confirmed what had been an open secret in the Chinese political landscape: it announced that Zhou Yongkang – a member of the previous Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) – was under investigation for serious violations of the party constitution, a euphemism for corruption, thus sounding the death knell of one of China’s most feared political heavyweights.

In breaking with all precedents in indicting a former leader who had been on the top rung of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and thereby sending out the message to the party rank and file that no one was untouchable in the current anti-graft campaign, Xi Jinping has given a clear signal that the fight against corruption will be a hallmark of his administration. More significantly, Xi has also underscored his position as *primus inter pares* at the apex of China’s political leadership.

The Same Game But Different Players

After assuming the top party position in December 2012 Xi had emphasised the importance of cleaning up the party by bringing down both high-ranking and low-level “tigers and flies” within Chinese officialdom. According to a leaked cable from the US Embassy in Beijing, Xi had publicly expressed disdain for the “all-encompassing commercialisation of society”, singling out corruption as the biggest threat to the CCP and the Chinese nation.

Since the 18th Party Congress when Xi succeeded Hu Jintao as party leader, more than 30 officials of vice-ministerial rank or above as well as scores of lower-ranking bureaucrats from government and

state-owned enterprises have come under investigation for either flouting the law or violating the party constitution.

Lodging official inquests into corrupt practices and abuse of power to remove one's political rivals is neither a novel development nor peculiar to the current Chinese leader. Former CCP leaders Hu and Jiang Zemin – having ascended the top post – have similarly moved against adversaries who had threatened to undermine their influence.

The same can be said of Zhou's case since it has been widely speculated that the former security czar had previously attempted to subvert Xi's authority in the run-up to the leadership transition by pushing for his fallen acolyte – the disgraced former party secretary of Chongqing, Bo Xilai – to join the ranks of the top party leadership. In 2013, Bo himself was jailed on charges of abuse of power and corruption.

The high stakes involved in the political game between party elites is revealed by the protracted period between Bo's downfall and the formal corruption inquiry into Zhou and his extended family. In the lead-up to Zhou's public censure, it would appear that Xi has already weathered his rival's counterattacks – one of which is believed to be a *Bloomberg* report in 2012 detailing the assets of Xi's relatives. As the former leader in charge of public security, Zhou would have been well placed to gather information on others.

Patron-Client Ties in Chinese Politics

In officially denouncing Zhou last week, however, Xi Jinping may well have been flogging a dead tiger in view of the fact that Zhou's powerbases – consisting of the Chinese public security apparatus; the provincial government of Sichuan; and the China National Petroleum Corporation – have progressively been dismantled since December 2012. Increasingly, Zhou had become politically isolated as his protégés from the different sectors fell one after another.

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the current campaign has been organised by Xi to install his own followers in those positions of power vacated by the recent purges. In instigating formal investigations against someone as firmly established within the upper echelons of Chinese politics as Zhou had been, Xi would have already garnered the support of the majority of party elites.

With vested interests deeply entrenched within the network of Chinese political figures – current and retired – Xi would have also had to obtain the backing of his predecessors, Jiang and Hu, with the former being responsible for having elevated Zhou to his previous high position. The *South China Morning Post* in August last year had reported that the leadership had given their consent to move against Zhou at their summer conference in Beidaihe.

Xi Strengthens His Hand Further

While Zhou has similarly been accused of 'serious disciplinary violations', the practice of rooting out corruption is as much motivated by political machinations as improving the overall governance of a country in which official corruption appears to have become institutionalised.

In point of fact, the CCP's anti-graft body, the CCDI – currently supervised by PBSC member Wang Qishan – reports directly to the party top brass. In a country rife with corruption, it is fair to surmise that the leadership headed by Xi would have had a say in identifying those personnel to be picked up by the CCDI for investigation.

While it remains unclear if the current campaign represents a genuine drive to purify the party, Xi's latest action is expected to restore some legitimacy to the CCP in the middle term. The decision to dismiss one of the country's former top leaders for allegedly misappropriating state assets is a shrewd move considering public anger at official corruption and excess has been seething for years. In so doing, Xi has also boosted his own political capital even further.

An hour after releasing its statement on Zhou, the CCP announced that it was holding the 4th Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee in October to discuss comprehensive legal reforms. It may be a while yet before it becomes clear whether the Zhou case marks a turning point for real institutional change in China. In snaring the big beast that is Zhou Yongkang, however, Xi has stamped his personal authority in Chinese elite politics and shown that he is no paper tiger.

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